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**Report: Grouse data skewed**

***Interior official allegedly bullied scientists to soften endangered species data***

**By Cory Hatch**

A high-ranking Interior Department official who reportedly tinkered with scientific documents, allegedly to prevent Endangered Species Act protection for several species including the greater sage grouse, will get scrutinized by Washington lawmakers today.

Witnesses before the House Natural Resources Committee will testify that Deputy Assistant Interior Secretary Julie MacDonald used intimidation and manipulation to change scientific documents on species such as the greater sage grouse, the white-tailed prairie dog, Gunnison sage grouse, Gunnison's prairie dog, the California Tiger Salamander, the southwestern willow flycatcher, the Kootenai sturgeon and the Delta smelt fish.

MacDonald resigned her position May 1.

A "threatened" or "endangered" listing for the greater sage grouse would mean problems for oil and gas companies in the Upper Green River Valley. Scientists say that some sage grouse populations have declined roughly 50 percent when drilling pads came into their area. Bureau of Land Management officials are currently reviewing plans to increase drilling in the Pinedale area, including 4,400 new wells on the Pinedale Anticline.

An Inspector General's report states that MacDonald, a Bush administration appointee, gave confidential Interior Department and Environmental Protection Agency documents to officials at the California Farm Bureau, ChevronTexaco and the Pacific Legal Foundation, a conservative law firm that represents business interests and seeks Endangered Species Act reforms. MacDonald also regularly met with officials and lobbyists working for the California Farm Bureau and the Building Industry Association of Southern California.

In addition, MacDonald sent confidential information to a friend she met while participating in Internet fantasy role-playing games, the report states.

Further, the Inspector General's report also quoted officials and researchers as saying that MacDonald "bypassed managers to speak directly with field staff, often intimidating them and bullying them into producing documents that had the desired effect she and the former assistant secretary wanted."

As for the sage grouse study, MacDonald made roughly 370 comments and deletions to 47 pages of the documents, most of which cast doubt or eliminate information that would indicate problems with sage grouse across the West, according to the report. The former deputy assistant secretary also added paragraphs of information that scientists say is erroneous. By one official's estimate, "87 percent of Julie's comments or edits either create an error or inconsistency in the synthesis document or are simply her opinion."

MacDonald, a civil engineer with a master's degree in management, didn't have the authority, the experience or the education to edit scientific documents, said Mark Salvo, director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign. According to Salvo, one of the most telling MacDonald edits came when she questions sage grouse's reliance on sagebrush during the winter, saying, "I believe that is an overstatement, as they will eat other stuff if it's available."

But Salvo said MacDonald's statement is untrue.

"Sage grouse do depend on sagebrush throughout the winter," he said. "Her goal is to prevent the species from being protected under the Endangered Species Act, and apparently she was willing to say just about anything to do that."

Another example of MacDonald's reported edits is a passage on herbicides where she changes the text from "Chemical control of sagebrush has resulted in declines of breeding populations ..." to "Small chemical treatments interspersed with nontreated sagebrush habitats did not affect sage grouse use ..."

In the sage grouse report "Synthesis of Biological and Habitat information for use in the Greater Sage Grouse Extinction Risk Analysis," MacDonald also calls into doubt at least two scientific studies that, according to Salvo, represent some of the best and most respected sage grouse science available. Instead, MacDonald advocates using data supplied by the Owyhee Cattlemen's Association and the Idaho Cattle Association, two groups with a vested interest in keeping sage grouse off the Endangered Species List.

Francesca Grifo, director of the Scientific Integrity Program and senior scientist for the Union of Concerned Scientists, said MacDonald approached her job with "a certain level of sneakiness."

"What she did was create uncertainty where there wasn't any ... casting enough doubt to sway decisions," said Grifo, who is scheduled to testify before the House Natural Resources Committee today. "This is going around and changing the science without coming clean to the American public that they are undermining the protection of endangered species."

Eric Molvar, spokesman for the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, agreed.

"This political appointee was a very bad actor that did her utmost to prevent the protection of endangered fish and wildlife," he said. "Particularly in the Endangered Species Act, science is supposed to guide the decision-making process, not politics. Science was subservient to a political agenda that was specifically anti-wildlife and pro-industry."

"She really is a symptom of an anti-wildlife pressure that has been systematically applied to agency scientists and professionals throughout this administration," Molvar continued.

Josh Pollock, conservation director for the Center for Native Ecosystems, agreed that the manipulation of science is pervasive in the Bush administration.

"I think it's completely egregious," said Pollock. "It fits in the overall pattern of the Bush administration. ... It's a pretty systemic problem or a cultural problem in the Bush administration right now."

Grifo said the Union of Concerned Scientists has detected scientific tampering in a number of agencies including NASA, NOAA, FDA, EPA and DOI. Of 2,000 government scientists polled by the group, 699 "told us that they fear retaliation for discussing the mission-driven work of their agencies."

Four hundred thirty-two scientists from nine agencies said that they were told they couldn't publish in peer-reviewed journals if their work didn't adhere to agency policies.

"We have an incredible investment in these civil servant scientists," said Grifo. "We should respect their insights. I think it's time that we sent [Interior Secretary Dirk] Kempthorne a clear message that substituting opinions for science is unacceptable."

Grifo said the public should insist on safeguards that ensure accountability, transparency and basic scientific freedoms for government scientists, including whistleblower protection and a scientific panel to provide advice for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"There's no openness, so that we don't know what is happening," she said.

A Department of the Interior spokesman had no comment on MacDonald's resignation or allegations of scientific misconduct.